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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 KINSHASA 001639

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SUBJECT: RETURN OF DRC REFUGEES FROM TANZANIA TO SOUTH KIVU

Summary

1. (U) OFDA Rep Victor Bushamuka visited Baraka and Fizi from August 22 to 26 to assess the situation of returning DRC refugees from Tanzania. Fizi political leaders unilaterally decided in early August to send boats to Tanzania to bring refugees back to South Kivu at a rate of 5,000 per week so that they could participate in the upcoming elections. To humanitarians, this news was alarming as the area has limited logistical capacity to support a large influx of returnees. Fortunately, from early August to September 3, only 250 refugees were reported to have returned using the boats. The low turnout was attributed to the fact that many refugee families were unable to afford the transport cost from camps to the port in Tanzania and others are still worried about security in their areas of origin. The DRC and Tanzanian governments and UNHCR have also decided to start assisting voluntary repatriation to South Kivu on October 15 at the rate of 2,400 people per week. Humanitarians in the area believe that conditions in Fizi are not yet ready for returns in large numbers, particularly as significant work must be done before October. They also question, however, whether large numbers of refugees will respond to the new offer.
END SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

2. (U) From August 22 to 26, OFDA Rep Victor Bushamuka visited Baraka and Fizi to assess the situation of returning refugees from Tanzania. During the visit, the OFDA Rep met with UNHCR officials, Action Against Hunger (AAH) staff, representatives of other international organizations including ACTED and ATLAS Logistics, and local Red Cross officials who are currently working in the area. OFDA Rep also met with recent returnees and local populations in Baraka and Fizi centers in the territory of Fizi.

3. (U) Fizi is the southernmost territory of South Kivu situated about 250 km south of Bukavu on the shores of Lake Tanganika. The population of Fizi is dominated by the Bembe ethnic group, though there are also concentrations of Tutsi Banyamulenge in the high plateau of the territory. During the war periods, the majority of the Bembe population fled to Tanzania, while the Banyamulenge took refuge in Burundi and Rwanda. Following the August 13, 2004 massacre of 162 mainly Tutsi Banyamulenge refugees in Gatumba, Burundi, MONUC and other humanitarian organizations assisted the Banyamulenge refugees in Burundi to return to their areas in Uvira and Fizi territories. The estimated 152,000 refugees from Fizi and Baraka believed to be mainly ethnically Bembe are still living in camps in Tanzania, presumably waiting to be assisted to return. Small and spontaneous returns of refugees from Tanzania have continuously been observed in Fizi territory since 2004.

Voter Registration Used to Stimulate Refugees' Return

4. (U) In preparation for the 2006 elections, the voter registration process has started in many parts of the DRC. Although officially scheduled to start August 22 in South Kivu, voter registration had not yet begun when the OFDA Rep visited Baraka and Fizi. Bembe political leaders fear losing control of Fizi to Banyamulenge if refugees in Tanzania do not come back in time to register. As a result, Bembe leaders have recently increased pressure on

the DRC government and have increased appeals to humanitarians for immediate repatriation assistance to refugees from Tanzania. In addition, local officials in Baraka and Fizi imposed a tax of \$5 to farmers and \$10 to INGO staff per month to contribute to the effort of facilitating the return of refugees from Tanzania. According to the local population and INGO staff contacted by the OFDA Rep, this fundraising campaign has not succeeded as most people have been unable to comply.

15. (U) According to UNHCR staff in Baraka, a team of Bembe leaders went to Tanzania in mid-July to try to persuade refugees to come back. The strategy used by the team was to create fear in refugees by highlighting possible consequences if they fail to return for voter registration. Refugees were told that they would lose control of their territory to Banyamulenge if they do not participate in the upcoming elections. Refugees were also warned that failing to register would automatically lead to their losing Congolese citizenship as they would not receive the identity card that is given after voter registration. (Note: Independent Electoral Commission President Malu Malu subsequently went to the Fizi/Baraka area, and to the camps in Tanzania, to correct these kinds of reports and convey correct information.) Some refugees told the Bembe leaders in Tanzania that they have been contemplating their return since last year, but lack of transportation has prevented them from doing so.

Private Initiatives to Facilitate Refugee Returns

16. (U) Mrs. Shanila Mwanza, a parliamentarian from Fizi territory, rented four boats in early August to assist refugees' return. The rented boats had a combined capacity of transporting 5,000 people per week. The boats left the DRC for Kigoma in the second week of August and the first group of returnees was expected within the following week. To humanitarians, the possibility of sudden mass returns of refugees to Baraka and Fizi was alarming as the area had limited logistical capacity to absorb large numbers of returnees. Fortunately, by September 3 only 250 refugees had been reported to have returned to Fizi territory using the provided boats. It is reported that three boats remain in Kigoma waiting for volunteer returnees.

17. (U) Recent returnees contacted by the OFDA Rep said that the low turnout of returnees was due to the fact that most refugee families could not afford the transportation cost from the camps to the port. Kigoma port is about 160 km from Nyarugusu camp and 80 to 90 Km from Lugufu 1 and 2 camps, respectively. The average transport cost from camps to Kigoma port is about \$10 per person, which is out of reach for many refugee families. Other returnees pointed out that many refugees in Tanzania are still worried about security in their areas of origin. Reports of field crops being harvested or looted by soldiers that circulate in refugee camps have also played a major role in families deciding not to return. In addition, refugees who have learned that their houses or entire villages have been destroyed are less eager to return.

UNHCR Assisted Repatriation Set to Start October 15

18. (U) The first of the 152,000 Congolese refugees in the three camps in Tanzania are scheduled to be assisted to voluntarily head back to South Kivu beginning October 15. The decision to repatriate refugees was taken at a tripartite commission meeting between the DRC and Tanzanian governments and UNHCR in Kinshasa on September 18. The Congolese delegation at the meeting assured the group that all destinations in South Kivu will have adequate security for repatriation by September 30. The Tanzanian delegation also pledged to provide all necessary support to the return process. Both governments and UNHCR appealed to donors for funds to support the repatriation activity. The meeting recommended having trial movements before the actual start of repatriation to evaluate the logistical capacities and assistance needs. Although the tripartite meeting did not specify the planned repatriation rate per week, the head of the UNHCR office in Baraka has asked the humanitarians in the area to prepare for a repatriation rate of 2,400 people per week.

19. (U) Humanitarian organizations in the area have been expecting and preparing for mass returns of DRC refugees from Tanzania since last year. Most of the humanitarian actors admitted being tired of repeatedly being asked to prepare for mass returns that never happen. They also said that the process of waiting has greatly affected their program planning. Despite these complaints, the humanitarian community in Fizi territory has set up a coordinated plan in case of mass returns this year to

avoid duplication of efforts. They have all agreed on the distribution of tasks among them. The INGO AAH was given the responsibility of screening returnees at the entry point to assess their nutritional status. Malnourished returnees requiring medical attention would be referred to a therapeutic or supplementary nutrition center. Those arriving sick and requiring medical attention would be referred to the INGOs MSF-Holland or AMI for treatment. The local Red Cross is to manage the transit centers with UNHCR and World Food Program assistance. The transportation of returnees to their drop-off areas would be provided by UNHCR and OCHA.

Are Fizi and Baraka Ready for Mass Returns?

¶10. (U) When comparing the area now to the period in May 2004 when the OFDA Rep last visited, it is clear that significant progress has been made in terms of security and infrastructure. The Uvira-Baraka-Fizi road that was barely usable before has been rehabilitated. Two transit centers have been established in Fizi and one in Uvira territories. There are at least ten international humanitarian organizations established in Fizi territory compared to only three a year ago. The security situation has also improved in recent months in Baraka and Fizi. For instance, there are no more roadblocks along the Uvira-Fizi road. General Dunia, an ex-Mai-Mai leader who controls Fizi and Baraka, has instituted drastic disciplinary measures to reestablish security throughout his territory. Soldiers found guilty of raping, killing, or looting civilian properties are publicly executed. Many residents of Baraka credit the General for the prevailing security in the area.

¶11. (U) Despite the noticeable progress in the preparation for the return of refugees, most humanitarian actors contacted by OFDA Rep believe that Fizi territory is not yet ready for mass returns. The port of Baraka, which is logistically critical for repatriation, is still being rehabilitated. Although transit centers have been established in Baraka and Mushimbakye, they have a combined maximum capacity of 200 people, which appears insufficient given the 2,400 people expected per week. Fizi center, which is one of the planned drop-off areas, has no facility to assist returnees who are not from Fizi. Health facilities in Fizi are limited and MSF-Holland (Doctors without Borders), that was set to provide assistance to the general hospital of Fizi center, backed out of the negotiations in July.

¶12. (U) Local population assistance is always critical to the reintegration of returnees. However, the capacity of the local population in Baraka and Fizi to assist newcomers has been greatly reduced by the drought that occurred during the last agricultural season. Poor harvests throughout the territory led to significant price increases of agricultural products in local markets. The population of Fizi and Baraka who received OFDA-funded assistance last season remain vulnerable and unable to assist returnees. In addition to new returnees, program beneficiaries from last year would probably continue to qualify for food security assistance.

Conclusions

¶13. (U) The progressive improvement of security in South Kivu, and Fizi territory in particular, has been allowing small but continuous returns of refugees from Tanzania since 2004. However, despite the increased campaign for mass return of refugees and the assisted transportation provided by Bembe political leaders, the returning rate of refugees from Tanzania to Fizi territory has remained constant. This raises the question of whether refugees will respond to the newly planned assisted repatriation by UNHCR in October.

¶14. (U) Currently, the territory of Fizi has limited infrastructure to absorb large returnees and the local capacity to assist newcomers has greatly been reduced by drought. As a result, mass returns would certainly further increase strain on people's meager resources. Therefore, additional humanitarian assistance appears critical in case of a large influx of returnees in Fizi territory to avoid disastrous situations. OFDA Reps will continue to monitor developments to be able to activate additional mechanisms of assistance should such be warranted.
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